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THE STONES OF GAFSA

BY NORMAN DOUGLAS

I CANNOT think what has induced me to stay so long at this oasis of Gafsa, in the bleak uplands of southern Tunisia. There are many drawbacks to the place—chiefest of all, the intense cold at this season (January). And not far away are the sunny and low-lying palm groves of the Djerid, Tozeur, and Nefta, the destination of my voyage, as originally planned out. Yet here I am, held fast by some unaccountable spell. It must be those fascinating pre-historic flints. . . .

There is a low hill near the town, marked Meda hill on the map. Thither, after settling my concerns at the hotel, I swiftly bent my steps on the evening of my arrival, but came too late for the sunset; the colors had already faded out of things terrestrial; only overhead the play of blue and green and rose went on, freezing slowly to pale indigo. It was light enough, however, to see the configuration of the country; to realize the significance of this speck of culture in the waste, its strategic value: Gafsa is a veritable key of the Sahara. Barren mountains rise up on all sides save the south; and there, where the two highest ranges converge from east to west and almost meet, where the broad stream of the Oued Baiesh has carved itself a channel through the opening—there, at the very narrowest point—sits the oasis. A tangle of palms that sweep southward in a radiant trail of green, the crenelated walls of the Kasbah fortress gleaming through the interstices of the foliage; the whole verdant vision swathed in an orange-tawny frame of desolation, of things non-human.

Darkness was descending and still I lingered, my only companion being a dark brown dog of the jackal type, who walked round me suspiciously and barked, or rather whined, without ceasing. At last I took up a stone and he ran away.

But the stone remained in my hand; I glanced at it and saw that it was an implement of worked flint. Here was a discovery! Who were these carvers of stones, the ab-originals of Gafsa? How lived they?

A prolonged and melodious whistle from the distant railway-station served to remind me of the gulf of ages that separates these men from the life of our day. . . . But as if to efface without delay that consoling impression my downward path led me past a dark cavern before which was lighted a fire that threw gleams into its recesses; there was a family crouching around it; they lived in the hollow rock. A high-piled heap of bones near at hand suggested cannibalistic practices.

These, then, are the primitives of Gafsa. And for how long, I wonder, has this convenient shelter been inhabited? From time immemorial, perhaps; ever since the days of those others. And, after all, how little have they changed in the intervening thousands of years! The wild-eyed young wench, with her disheveled hair, ferocious bangle-ornaments, tattooings, and nondescript blue rags open at the side and revealing charms well fitted to disquiet some robust savage—what has such a creature in common with the rest of us? Not even certain raptures, misdeemed primeval; hardly more than what falls to man and beast alike. On my appearance she rose up and eyed me unabashed, then sank to the ground again amid her uncouth and naked cubs; the rock, she said, was warmer than the black tents; they paid no rent; for the rest, her man would return forthwith. And while she still spoke there was a clattering of stones, and a herd of goats scrambled up and vanished within the opening. The partner was neither pleased nor displeased at seeing me there; every day he went to pasture his flock on the slope of the opposite hills, returning at nightfall; he tried to be civil, but failed for want of vocabulary. I gave him the salutation and passed on in the gloaming. . . .

The Kasbah is an interesting place. It is a Byzantine construction, covering a large expanse of ground and rebuilt by the French on theatrical lines, with decorative bastions and other warlike pomp; the old walls are smothered under a modern layer of plaster divided into square fields to imitate solid stone-work; it looks best in the moonlight, when this childish cardboard effect is toned down. Thousands of blocks of Roman masonry have been wrought

into those walls, as well as such a number of ancient inscriptions that a French traveler described the fortress as a "*musée épigraphique*." Yes, this must be the attraction of Gafsa—those old stones lingering like ghosts among a people who have lost all memory of their meaning. There is no continuity of tradition here, as in countries like Greece, and this complete rupture of all links with the past, in the face of these speaking memorials, has a certain charm.

One of the two hot springs of Gafsa is inclosed within this Kasbah, while the other rises near at hand and flows into the celebrated bath—the *Termid*, as the natives, using an old Greek word, still call it. It is a large and deep stone basin half full of warm water, in which small fishes, snakes, and tortoises disport themselves; the massive engirdling walls demonstrate its Roman origin. Thick mists hang over the "*termid*" in the early mornings, when the air is chilly, but later on it becomes a lively place, full of laughter and splashings. Here for a sou you may get the boys to jump down from the parapet and wallow in the muddy ooze at the bottom; the water, though transparent, is not colorless, but of the blue-green tint of the aquamarine crystal. Above this basin is another one, that of the women, with an old Latin inscription running along one of its flanks; and below it, at the foot of a lurid staircase, a suite of subterranean (Roman) chambers, a kind of Turkish bath for men, where the water hurries darkly through; the place is reeking with a steamy heat and objectionable beyond words—it would not be easy to describe, in the language of polite society, those features in which it is most repulsive to civilized men.

How easily, as in former days, might now a health-giving wonder be created out of these waters of Gafsa that well up in a river of warmth and purity only to be hopelessly contaminated! The French tried the experiment, but the natives objected and they gave way; these are the spots on the sunny ideal of "*pacific penetration*." I am all for keeping up local color, even when it entails, as it generally does, a certain percentage of local smells; yet it seems a pity that such glorious hot springs, a gift of the gods in a climate like this, should be converted into a *cloaca maxima*, especially in Gafsa, which already boasts of a superfluity of open drains.

But my friend the magistrate showed me a special bath-

ing-room which has lately been built for the use of Europeans. We tried the door and found it locked.

Where was the key?

At the *Ponts et Chaussées*.

I promptly went there and discovered an elderly official of ample proportions dozing in a trim apartment—the chief of the staff. Great was this gentleman's condescension; he opened his eyes wide, bade me be seated, and inquired after my wants.

The key? The key of the "piscine"? He regretted he could give me no information as to its whereabouts, no information whatever; he had never so much as seen the key in question; perhaps it had been lost—perhaps it never existed. Several tourists, he added, had already come on the same quest as myself; he also on one occasion last year thought he would like to take a bath, but—what would you? There was no key! If I liked to bathe, I might go to the tank at the gardens of Sidi Ahmed Zarroung.

I gently insisted, pointing out that I did not care for a walk across the wind-swept desert only to dip myself into a pool of lukewarm and pestilentially sulphurous water. But "the key" was evidently a sore subject.

"There is no key, monsieur"; and he accompanied the words with a portentous negative nod that blended the solicitude of a trusted friend with the firmness of a Bismarck. This closed the discussion; with expressions of undying gratitude, and a few remarks as to the palpable advantages to be derived from keeping a public bathing-room permanently locked, I left him to his well-earned slumbers. . . .

This collecting of flint implements grows upon one at Gafsa: it is in the air. And I find that quite a number of persons have anticipated me in this amusement, and even written ponderous tomes upon the subject, as is generally the case when one thinks to have made a scientific discovery. These stones are scattered all over the plain and Monsieur Couillault has traced the site of several workshops—"ateliers"—of prehistoric weapons near Sidi Mansur, which lies within half a mile of Gafsa, whence he has extracted quantities of flints of every shape; among them some saws and a miniature spade.

My collection of these relics, casually picked up here and there, is already considerable, and illustrates every period of those early ages—uncouth battle-axes and spear-points;

fine needles, apparently used for sewing skins together; the so-called "laurel leaves" as thin as cardboard; knife-blades; instruments for scraping beast-hides—all of flint. What interests me most are certain round throwing-stones; a few are flat on both sides, but others, evidently the more popular shape, are flat below and rise to a cone above. Of these latter I have a series of various sizes; the largest are for men's hands, but there are smaller ones not more than eleven centimetres round for the use of children: one thinks of the fierce little hands that wielded them these many thousand years ago. Even now the natives will throw by preference with a stone of this disk-like shape, the cone pointing downward. But, to judge by the size of their implements, the hands of this pre-historic race can hardly have been as large as those of their modern descendants.

Then, as now, Gafsa must have been an important site; the number of these weapons is astonishing. Vast populations have drifted down the stream of time at this spot, leaving no name or mark behind them; nothing save these relics, fashioned, by the merest of chances, out of a practically imperishable material. Steel and copper would have rotted away long ago, and the stoutest marble palaces crumbled to dust under the teeth of the desert air.

The bed of the Oued Baiesh, which is nearly half a mile broad in some places, is rich in these worked flints that have been washed out of its steep banks by the floods. Walking here the other day with a miserable young Arab who, I verily believe, had attached himself to me out of sheer boredom (since he never asked for a *sou*), I observed in the distance a solitary individual, a European, pacing slowly along, as though wrapped in meditation: every now and then he bent down to the ground.

"That's a French gentleman from Gafsa. He collects those stones of yours all day long."

Another amateur, I thought.

"But not like yourself," he went on. "He picks them up, bad and good, and when they don't look nice he works at them with iron things. I've seen them. He makes very pretty stones, much prettier than yours. Then he sends them away."

"How do you know this?"

"I've looked in at his window."

A modern "*atelier*" of flints—this was an amusing reve-

lation. Perhaps—who knows?—half the museums of the world are stocked with these superior products.

Sages will be interested to learn that Professor Koken of Tübingen, in a learned pamphlet, lays it down that these flints of Gafsa belong to the Mesvinian, Strepyian, Præchellean—to say nothing of the Mousterian, Aurignacian, Solutrean, Magdalenian, and other types. So be it. He further says, what is more intelligible to the uninitiated, that a bed of hard conglomerate which crops up at Gafsa on either side of the Oued Baiesh has been raised in days of yore; it was raised so slowly that the river found time to carve itself a bed through it during the process of elevation; nevertheless, a certain class of these artificial implements, imbedded since God knows when, already formed part of this “natural” conglomerate ere it began to uplift itself. This gives one some idea of the abyss of time that lies between us and the skin-clad men who lived here in olden days.

An abyss of time. . . .

But I remembered the cave wench of the Meda hill. And my companion to-day was of the same grade—a characteristic semi-nomad boy of the poorest class; an orphan: of course (they are nearly all orphans), and quite abandoned. His whole vocabulary could not have exceeded 150 words; he had never heard of the Apostle of Allah or his sacred book; he did not know his own age; he could only run and throw stones and endure, like a beast, those ceaseless illnesses of which death alone—an early death, as a rule—is allowed to cure them. His clothing was an undershirt and the inevitable burnous, brown with dirt.

“What have you done to-day?” I asked him.

“Nothing.”

“And yesterday?”

“Nothing. Why should I do anything?”

“Don’t you *ever* wash?”

“I have nobody to wash me.”

And so the last few days have passed. Every morning I make solemn preparations for my departure to Tozeur, where the sun, they say, still exhales a certain warmth. But I end in remaining here, despite the Siberian climate.

The glacial wind is less felt in the oasis, and the best time to visit this grove is by night, when the moon plays wonderful tricks of light and shadow with the over-arching foliage. The smooth sandy stretches at the outskirts of the gardens

shine like water at rest, on which the leaves of an occasional sparse tuft of palms are etched with a crystalline hardness of delineation. Such is the abundance of water, that these Gafsa plantations have a character different from others of this province; they are more artlessly furnished, with rough, park-like districts and a not unpleasing impression of riot and waste—waste in the midst of plenty. Then there is a delightful Theocritean bit of country, the temperate region at the tail-end of the grove. It reminds one of southern Calabria. Only olives grow here—seventy-five thousand of them. Besides their silvery-gray trunks you may see herds of the small but brightly tinted cattle reposing; the ground is pied with daisies and buttercups, oleanders border the streamlets, and the plaintive notes of the djouak, the pastoral reed of the nomads, resound from some hidden copse. It must be charming here in the springtime.

But do what he will, a man who has lived in the tropics becomes rather *blasé* in the matter of vegetation.

Besides, there are no flints to be found here.

Ah, Mr. Koken, Mr. Koken!—those light words of yours have borne a heavy fruit. I possess four hundred implements now, and they will double the weight of my luggage and ruin my starched shirts, especially those formidable “Praechellean” skull-cleavers. Perhaps it will be safest after all, to throw the whole collection away again, for I know exactly what the customs officer at Marseilles will say when he peeps into my bag: “*Tiens, des cailloux! Monsieur est botaniste?*” And then a crowd of people will assemble, to whom I must explain everything, with the result of being arrested for smuggling forbidden mining samples out of a French colony, and ending my days in some insanitary French prison.

Besides the oasis, there are other interesting walks in the neighborhood of Gafsa, but I can imagine nothing more curious than the town itself; a place of some five thousand inhabitants, about a thousand of whom are Jews, with a sprinkling of Italian trades-people and French officials and soldiers. Beyond naming its streets and putting up a few lamps, the government has left it in its Arab condition; the roadways are unpaved, the houses lean this way and that, and, being built of sun-dried earth-tinted brick, have an air of crumbling to pieces before one’s very eyes. Everywhere are immense blocks of chiselled stone worked into the

ephemeral Arab clay as doorsteps or lintels, or lying about at random, or utilized as seats at the house-entrance; they date from Roman or earlier times—columns, too, some of them adorned with the lotus pattern, the majority unpretentious and solid.

What do the natives think of these relics of past civilizations? Do they ever wonder whence they came? “The stones are there,” they will tell you. Yet the wiser among them will speak of *Ruman*: they have heard of *Ruman* mon-ey-s and antiquities.

Melkarth, hero of colonization, is said to have surrounded Gafsa with a wall, pierced by a hundred gates, whence its presumable name Hecatompilos, the city of a hundred gates. The Egyptians ruled it; then the Phoenicians, who called it Kafaz, the walled; and after the destruction of Carthage it became the retreat and treasure-house of Numidian Kings. Greeks, too, exercised a powerful influence upon the place, and all these civilized peoples had prepared Gafsa to appreciate the beneficent rule of the Romans. Then came Vandals and Byzantines, who gradually grew too weak to resist the floods of plundering Arab nomads; the rich merchants fled, their palaces fell to ruins, the town became a collection of mud huts inhabited by poor cultivators living in terror of the neighboring Hammama tribe of true Arabs, who actually forbade them to walk beyond the limits of the Jebel Assalah—a couple of miles distant. So the French found them in 1881.

The place, therefore, has gone through too many vicissitudes to be anything but a witches’ cauldron of mixed races. Seldom one sees a handsome or characteristic face; they have not the wild solemnity of the desert folk, nor yet the etiolated, gentle graces of the Tunisian citizen class; much less the lily-like personal beauty of the blond Algerian Berbers. Apart from some men that display the features of the savage Neanderthal brood that lived here in pre-historic times, the only pure race-type that survives is of unquestionably Egyptian origin; no wonder, since Egyptian invasions of this region went on for five centuries, culminating in the extended sea-dominion of Thotmes III.

A bastard Greco-Latin was the language of the place up to the thirteenth century A.D.

This confusion of blood has done one thing for them—it has given them an uncommon laxity in religious matters.

They are the least bigoted Orientals one could wish to meet; only fifteen in a hundred, perhaps even less, perform the devotions prescribed by the prophet. And it is part of their charming heterodoxy to be dog-eaters. They will catch and devour each others' dogs; they even breed them for the market, though they dare not expose the meat publicly, any more than that of swine, which they eat with relish.

Gafsa lies high, and I ask myself whether its fierce shiftings of temperature, its nocturnal radiation that splits the very rocks and renders life impossible for many plants (outside the cultivated zone, which equalizes these extremes)—whether all this has not had a numbing and stupefying influence on the character of the inhabitants. Would not a man, under such perennial vexations, end in bowing his head and letting things take their course?

That witchery of Orientalism, with its immemorial customs, its wondrous hues of earth and sky—it exists, chiefly, for the delectation of hyperborean dreamers. The desert life and those many-tinted, moldering cities have their attraction, but the misery at many hundred intermediate places like Gafsa is too great, too irremediable, to be otherwise than an eyesore. They have not solved the problem of the simple life, these shivering, bleary-eyed folk. Their daily routine is the height of discomfort; they are forever ailing in health; they die like flies. Naturally enough; for it is not too much to say, of the poorer classes, that they eat dirt, and that only once a day.

But if fortune smiles, they will gorge like Eskimos, like boa-constrictors.

Only yesterday there swept past these doors a bright procession, going half-trot, to a lively chant of music: the funeral of a woman. I inquired of a passer-by the cause of her death.

“She ate too much, and burst.”

During the summer months, in the fruit-growing districts, quite a number of children will “burst” in this fashion every day.

The streets of Gafsa are swept every morning by a band of minor offenders who are marched out of prison for that purpose. But this cleansing does not extend to the native houses and court-yards, which survive in all their original, inconceivable squalor—squalor so uncompromising that it

has long ago ceased to be picturesque. What glimpses into humble interiors, when native secretiveness has not raised a rampart of earthen bricks at the inside of the entrance! In the day-time it is like looking into vast, abandoned pigsties, fantastically encumbered with palm-logs and Roman building-blocks and rubbish heaps which display the accumulated filth of generations—there is hardly a level yard of ground—rags and dust and decay! Here they live, the poorer sort, and no wonder they have as little sense of home as the wild creatures of the waste. But at night, when the most villainous objects take on mysterious shapes and meanings, these courtyards become grand; they assume an air of biblical desolation, as though the curse of Heaven had fallen upon the life they once witnessed.

The stones are there. This is another feature which they have in common with the beasts of earth: never to pause before the memorials of their own past. Goethe says that where men are silent stones will speak. If ever they spoke, it is among these crumbling composite walls of Gafsa.

A Roman inscription of the age of Hadrian, which now forms the step of an Arab house, will arrest your glance and turn your thoughts awhile in the direction of this dim, romantic figure. How little we really know of the Imperial wanderer, whose journeyings may still be traced by the monuments that sprang up in his footsteps! Never, since the world began, has there been a traveler in the grandiose style of Hadrian; he perambulated his world like a god, crowned with a halo of benevolence and omnipotence. And it occurs to me that there must be other relics of antiquity still buried under the soil of Gafsa, which is raised on a mound, like an island, above the surrounding country; particularly in the vicinity of the “termid,” which one may suppose to have lain near the center of the old town.

And where are the paving-stones? The painstaking John Leo says that the streets of Gafsa are “broad and paved like those of Naples or Florence.” Have they been slowly submerged under the débris of Arabism, or taken up and worked into the masonry of the Kasbah and other buildings? Not one is left: so much is certain.

I borrowed Sallust and tried to press some flavor out of his description of Marius’s march to the capture of Gafsa. It was a fine military performance, without a doubt; he led his troops by unsuspected paths across the desert, fell upon

the place, sacked and burned it, and divided the booty among his soldiers: all this, without the loss of a single man. But what interests me most is the style of Sallust himself. His outlook upon life, his choice of words, are the note of tomorrow, and when I compare with him certain writers of my own period, I seem to be unrolling a papyrus from Pharaoh's tomb, or spelling out the elucubrations of some maudlin scribe of Prester John.

The stones are there. And the quarries whence the Romans drew them have also been found; they lie in the flanks of the Jebel Assalah and are well worth a visit; legions of bats—tirlils, the Arabs call them—hang in noisome clusters from the roof.

Concerning these bats the following story, with which I will close this sketch, is told in Gafsa.

Not long ago a rich Englishman came here; he used to go out in the evenings to shoot bats; then he put them into bottles with spirits of wine—he was an amateur of bats. On the day of his departure from the place, he said to the polyglot Arab guide whom he had picked up somewhere on his wanderings:

“You will rejoin me in Tunis in ten days. Bring me more bats—tirlils: *comprenni?*—from this country. I will give you fifty centimes apiece.”

“*Bon, monsieur,*” said the guide, and took counsel with the folks of Gafsa, who, after certain stipulations and reservations, showed him the way into these quarries.

On the day appointed, he entered the rich tourist's hotel in Tunis, followed by ten porters, each carrying a large sack.

“Hello,” said the Englishman, “what's all this?”

“Bats, monsieur.”

“Eh? How much?”

“Bats; *tirlils, chauva-souris, pipistrolli* . . . They will need much bottles. Six hundred tirlils in each sack; ten sacks; six thousand tirlils. Much bottles! Three thousand francs, monsieur. Shall I open him?”

The tourist cast a dismayed glance over the sacks, gently heaving with life.

“Look here,” he said, “I'll give you fifty francs. . . .”

The Arab was surprised and grieved. He thought he was giving a pleasure to monsieur, who had asked for bats. He had been obliged to borrow money from his aged mother

to help him to pay the nine hundred francs already disbursed for assistance in catching the tirlils; he had risked his life; there were transport expenses, too: very heavy. He had traveled with many Englishmen and had always found them to be men of honor—men who kept their word. And in this case there were witnesses to the bargain who would be ready, if necessary, to go into the French tribunals and testify to what they had heard.

“I see. Well, come to-morrow morning, but go away now, quick! before I break your head; take your infernal tirlils to your *funduk* and be off: clear out—*comprenni?*”

And he looked so very angry that the Arab, a prudent fellow, walked backward out of the room, more surprised and grieved than ever.

Thanks to the disinterested and strenuous exertions of a Jewish international lawyer, the affair was settled out of court, after all—fifteen hundred francs, plus expenses of transport. . . .

NORMAN DOUGLAS.